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Steven C. Bahls  
*Augustana College*

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# Three Attributes of a Strong Community

Steve Bahls, President of Augustana College

A Homily Presented at Augustana's Ascension Chapel -- October 27, 2008

## **Text: Romans 12:3-8**

*For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.*

I'd like to talk this morning about what I think makes Augustana College great -- our community. In my 31 years as a student, professor, and college administrator I have never witnessed a community as remarkable as this one.

This text from Romans tells us much about community -- and particularly about our individual role in community. The strongest communities are those that recognize these three biblical principles:

- *First, strong communities are those where members are humble.* In the Apostle Paul's words, members of these communities have sober judgment and do not think of themselves more highly than they ought. Not all communities possess the trait of humility. And it is easy to see what happens when communities don't. The most visible example of a community lacking humility today can be found on Wall Street. Leaders of mega-banks and others had a three-year party where they were drunk on power and greed, and -- as many have observed -- America now has a hangover. People like you and your generation weren't invited to the party, but now we are being asked to clean up the mess. Members of the Wall Street crowd forgot that we entrusted them with positions of leadership -- not to line their own pockets -- but to be stewards of a financial system that we can rely upon. Because they weren't humble, they didn't exercise sober judgment, letting their egos get the best of them.

I like the humility that I often see in the Augustana community. Each year, members of the Augustana community invest tens of thousands of hours in community service without seeking recognition for themselves. We, the members of the Augustana community, serve others, not to aggrandize ourselves, but because we know that we are called to service as part of our vocation as God's people.

- *Second, strong communities recognize that we have different gifts and members of the community are called to use those gifts well.* Paul mentions the gifts of serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leading and showing mercy. We do not possess these gifts in equal measure, but each of us is given a healthy share of at least one of these gifts.

Think of the hundreds of Augustana employees who serve us by preparing our meals, keeping this campus clean and beautiful; keeping us safe or working behind the scenes in the many offices of the college. Think of the wonderful faculty members and coaches who have committed their lives to teaching. But all colleges have people with these attributes. What most impresses me is the number of people who have the gifts of encouragement and mercy. Each of us needs encouragement and mercy. We need people who will pick us up when we are down. Think of the times you've been encouraged. Perhaps you were down in the dumps and you needed a lift -- or maybe you needed encouragement to reach for a higher goal. I trust you have all found encouragement at Augustana. I know I have.

- *Finally, a community not only has members with different talents - it is a place where community members respect those who are different from them.* In Paul's words -- though we are different, we all belong to each other.

Many of you read this year's first-year book -- *Warriors Don't Cry: a Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High* by Melba Beals. For those of you who have not, Melba was one of the African-American students who helped lead the integration of the Little Rock Schools. Melba and her classmates were subjected to almost unbearable physical and psychological harassment for a prolonged period of time. But, in reflecting on those days and the lessons she learned, here is what she said: "The task that remains is . . . to see ourselves reflected in every other human being and to respect and honor our differences."

I believe that Augustana is a place like Melba Beals envisions, where we see ourselves reflected in others and honor our differences. When we are at our best we take time to acknowledge and thank those who are different than we are. Student groups like Safari (Student Advocates for Awareness of Refugee and Immigrant Issues), Amnesty International, Best Buddies, Student Justice Coalition and Fair Trade Matters help us broaden our collective perspectives to humanize those members of our world community who have been marginalized. Others groups help us understand our own diversity -- groups like the Multicultural Program Board and Prism. A true community recognizes that it is only as strong as its weakest link, and as a result, it works to build up its weakest link.

Those are the three attributes of our community that make Augustana strong -- we are humble, we each have different gifts, and we respect and encourage those who are different than we are.

Before I close, let me single out one recent effort at Augustana that gives evidence of the strength of our community. It is those members of our community who are working to create a more sustainable footprint for Augustana College. Their efforts have been marked by three attributes -- those you recognize from today's scriptures -- humility, employing different gifts and acknowledging that our differences make us strong.

Those students, faculty members and administrators who established such programs as Farm-to-Fork, more aggressive recycling, free bus rides with an Augustana ID did so largely behind the scenes. They were focused on stewardship of the earth and its resources, not on calling attention to themselves.

Likewise, those who encourage us to be more sustainable employ very different gifts effectively. Some have the gift of service, like those who volunteer at Wesley Acres, the vegetable farm from which we receive our produce. Others have the gift of organization, like those members of Global Affect who have gotten over 700 signatures

on petitions to ban disposable water bottle. Others have the gift of teaching, helping us understand the importance of sustainability. And still others have the gift of leadership, including those who serve on our campus Sustainability Committee.

Finally, those who have been active in the environmental movement at Augustana, more than almost any other group, recognize that though we are all different, all of us, in our own way, can do our part. Administrators can do their part through policy. Faculty can do their part through teaching, and students can do their part by working to help us all consume less. We are only as strong as our weakest link and we need to encourage each other.

Yes, the environmental push at Augustana and other attributes of our community remind us that we are "one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function" and that "we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."

Amen.

	Accounting	Communication Studies	Geography	Music	Pre-Optometry
	Africana Studies	Computer Science	Geology	Music Education	Pre-Pharmacy
	Anthropology	Creative Writing	German Studies	Music Performance	Pre-Physical Therapy
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	Communication Sciences	Ethics	Mathematics	Pre-Music Therapy	Spanish
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